RITUAL STRUCTURE

Moharram. On the tenth day in the month of Moharram, Imam Hussain, the grandson of Mohammed, was put to death in the plains of Karbala after being denied food and water for three days. Moharram is observed in honour of this martyr and his associates. On the Moharram day symbols of Imam Hussain and his family, known as *alums*, are taken out by the Muslims in a procession to a nearby river or tank. All along the route they beat their breasts and cry aloud 'O, son of Ali' or 'Hussain, Hussain' and wail over the martyr's death. *Tajia* or large paper models of his tomb are also taken out and immersed in water. In all Muslim households a sweet drink either of water and sugar, or of milk and sugar, is prepared and distributed among friends and relations. The giving of alms and charity on this day is believed to contribute greatly towards ensuring one's future.

Meelad Sharif. Unlike Moharram, which calls for mourning, Meelad Sharif is an occasion for rejoicing, as the Prophet Mohammed was born on the twelfth day of the month of Rabi-ul-Awwal. On the eleventh and twelfth days of this month people observe a fast. Muslim priests visit their homes, and passages from the Koran are read. Flowers and sweets are distributed in the name of Mohammed. The celebrations are continued for a month; although the festivities are at their peak on the two days mentioned above.

Giarwin Sharif. This is an important festival for the Sunni sect of the Muslims. It is observed in honour of Abdul Kader Geelani who belonged to Mohammed's generation, and was regarded as a very pious and holy figure. On the eleventh day of the month of Rabi-us-sani, the Muslims of Shamirpet fly the flag of Abdul Kader on their houses, and offer sweets, flowers and prayers in the name of their hero.

Shabe Miraj. On the twenty-sixth day of Rajjub, accompanied by an angel, Mohammed is believed to have visited the seven heavens and hell. Later it is said that he had an audience with Allah himself. To celebrate this event, this day is expected to be spent in meditation and prayer. If possible people keep awake for the whole night saying prayers and asking for Allah's blessings.

Shabe Barat. On the night of the fourteenth day of Shaban, Muslims offer sweets and bread in the name of their deceased kin. They visit their graves and offer flowers and prayers. It is believed

1: Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

769 that on this day the spirits of the dead come out to see their relations and to receive presents from them. Later all Muslims—men and women (if they are not in their menstrual period)—say their prayers and ask for God's blessing for their long life. Also they read the Koran. This night is important in that it is now that Allah determines the course of the lives of his followers for the coming year.

796 *Ramzan.* Ramzan is the most important month in the religious year of the Muslims. As far as possible, people try to fast for the whole month. They can have food before dawn and after dusk, but in between even a drop of water is not permitted. During these days one should devote as much time as possible to meditation and prayer. The twenty-sixth day of the month is specially important because it was on this day that 'Mohammed received the Koran from Allah'. People wear new clothes on this day, read the Koran and say their prayers. There is considerable enthusiasm in evidence as all Muslims—men, women and children—say their prayers and seek God's blessings. The month-long fasting ends on the day they see the new moon. The next day is spent in festivity and is known as 'Id-ul-fitr'. People breakfast early and wear their best—possibly new—clothes. The men go to the mosque for their Id prayers. After the prayers they go round to their friends' houses meeting and greeting them. On this day and on the two days following a sweet preparation consisting of vermicelli, milk and dates is made, and portions of it are sent to friends and relations. It is desirable that those who can afford it should distribute 2½ seers of grain per head to the poor and the needy.

[735]

Id-uz-zuha. This festival is celebrated on the tenth day of the month of Zilhij. People get up early in the morning and without breakfast go to the mosque for their prayers. When they return home they sacrifice goats in the name of God. The general rule is that one goat is sacrificed in the name of each member of the family; but if this is not possible financially, a goat each may be sacrificed for each adult member of the household. Of course, even this is too much for many of the poorer Muslims, who sacrifice just one goat on behalf of the whole family. The meat of the sacrificed animals is cooked and people have their breakfast. Then they go round to meet and greet their friends. Delicacies and meat dishes are prepared in fairly large quantities and distributed among friends and relations.

I: Dube E-5 (1961-62) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17
Hindus

puts a few handfuls of earth in the grave. In the case of a burial all persons present at the spot take a hand in filling the grave. When the pyre is burnt half-way, or when the grave is filled up, the people return home, bathing on the way. 764

What happens to the soul of the dead? If the death is on an auspicious day and time, the soul goes straight to the Supreme Being; ordinarily it hovers round the house—mainly on the roof, above the main entrance—for eleven to thirteen days. This is the stereotype description; but further analysis reveals a rather diffused belief-pattern: (i) near the place of burial or cremation the person dwells in a ghost-like form; (ii) the soul goes to God, where according to the deeds of the deceased in his life-time it is sent to heaven or hell; (iii) it takes re-birth, often within a few days of the death—as a human being or in some other species; (iv) it can be called back through prescribed ritual to reside with the other ancestor-spirits in the house. Some of these explanations appear to be contradictory, but people believe in them all at once. 775

On the third day after death the first purificatory rites take place, involving the cleansing of the house, washing of all household linen and clothes, and the throwing away of all earthen pots used for cooking or for storing water. On the eleventh or thirteenth day further purificatory rites are performed which remove the ritual impurity of members of the household. On this day food and water are offered to the soul of the deceased, near relations have a hair-cut and bath (on the death of the father or mother all the hair on the head as well as moustache and beard must be shaved) and a feast is given. Among the higher castes a Brahmin belonging to one of the nearby villages comes and conducts the rites on this day; others follow their own caste customs. These higher castes collect the bones from the cremation ground and immerse them in a holy river—generally in the Godavari, which is the nearest to Shamirpet, but in exceptional cases in the Ganges, which is regarded as the holiest of all rivers by the Hindus all over India. As pointed out earlier, in the Petramasa fortnight water is offered to the ancestor-spirits; and during the first Petramasa after death the soul of the deceased is invited to 'come back' and is lodged with the spirits of the other ancestors in one corner of the house. 768 765 769

Abnormal deaths require a special treatment. A woman dying 800

RITUAL STRUCTURE

If ancestor-spirits are ignored and 'not given their due' they warn the family by causing some minor—but noticeable—trouble. It is for the members of the family to take this 'timely warning' and remove the cause of the ancestors' anger. Failure in this often leads to serious consequences and irreparable losses. Ill-luck and misfortunes persist all along the way of a person whose 'stars are unfavourable'. Hysteria, fits and 'possession by spirits' are the result of hostility of spirits and ghosts. The village goddesses are known for their violent temperament and retaliate quickly and severely, even for minor offences against them. The all-India gods are comparatively pacific; and punish people only for 'gross disrespect' shown towards them. Enmity may lead to the use of black magic or witchcraft, which may be the root cause of the trouble in many cases of persistent disease and ill-luck.

Most of the cases need the diagnosis of a specialist. Sometimes the ancestor-spirits convey their anger in dreams to some member of the family. Often the ghost possessing an individual reveals its identity through its victim. But in other cases a proper diagnosis is necessary. Why is the ancestor-spirit angry? What should be done to pacify it? How could the evil influence of unlucky stars be averted? Only the Brahmin or a local seer can answer these questions. For undoing the evil influence of spirits and ghosts the services of a competent specialist must be sought. Similarly, the hostile magician or witch must be matched by a more powerful magician.

The ancestor-spirits are not very difficult to please. When the cause of their anger is known, an apology followed by worship is often enough to appease them. Fasting, repentance and food offerings are generally enough to please the gods. Goddesses are more difficult, and require the sacrifice of a fowl or goat. Unfavourable stars require fasting, worship and certain ceremonies following the recommendations of the Brahmin. The giving of alms to the Brahmin and the poor generally follows these ceremonies. Several different techniques can be employed to keep ghosts and spirits in check, and for counteracting black magic and witchcraft. As far as possible, 'all the reasonable demands of a ghost should be fulfilled', but if it still persists in its mischief 'it should be tied down' and 'kept in captivity'. Against sorcery and witchcraft drastic steps are required. For action under both these categories, i.e. against ghosts, as well as against black magic and witchcraft, three

1: Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

natural and necessary. Only morons and cripples remain single. Though it is rare for people to renounce their home and property in old age, old men and women excessively attached to material goods come in for a good deal of criticism, and people often remark about them, 'Will they carry their wealth with them to the other world when they die?' It is at this time that their thoughts turn more to religion and to the destiny of their souls in the future life, and it is now that they generally undertake pilgrimages to holy places. In a sense the broad essentials of the philosophy of the *ashramas* can be said to permeate the life and thought of the Hindu villagers. The village Muslims share these social attitudes with their Hindu neighbours. With conversion to Islam they have changed their religious faith, but in the socio-cultural spheres of life they still continue to have more or less the same basic attitudes as the Hindus. In their family ethics and ideals the two groups demonstrate considerable similarity.

To the village people the necessity of both marriage and family is self-evident. It is necessary that the family line should be continued. A male heir must be left. An unmarried person past the marriage age is an object of pity. A couple without a son are unhappy. Childlessness and inability to produce a male child on the part of a woman often lead to a polygynous household. Marriage is regarded as essential among all the castes and social groups in the village. In a community of 2,494 persons, demographic survey reveals the presence of only two single persons—both women. One of these is a deaf-mute; the other has been a victim of epileptic fits from her childhood and has in addition the unenviable reputation of being a thief. For the clean-caste Hindus the continuity of the family line is necessary for a further reason. A male child must make a ceremonial offering of water to the spirits of his deceased parents and ancestors, without which their souls may not have peace. The untouchable castes as well as the semi-tribal groups also have this ritual in a modified form. The Muslims neither have this belief nor any attendant ritual, but they too share with the Hindus the sentiment against childlessness.

1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE FAMILY

The patrilineal and patrilocal elementary or joint family is the normal type of family unit met with in this part of rural India.